

support violent resistance by the poor against the oppression of the rich. My argument is diametrically opposite such a position.

The authors struggle to find a unifying theme in the letter, insomuch that the final discussion (and a very brief one at that) of the book has the subtitle “A Unifying Motif?” The question mark demonstrates their doubts. Could it be that in their attempts to fit the book into a neat three-part structure, they fail to recognize an overarching theme? Elsewhere I suggest “suffering” as such a motif.

Blomberg and Kamell, however, correctly realize that social action is central to James. Their recognition of James’s emphasis on issues of poverty and wealth alerts us to the meaningfulness of his writing to peoples of the two-thirds or “majority” world, whose life-realities parallel James’s own first-century audience. Thus, for example, while for centuries the northern European-American theologians debated the “faith-works” pericope (2:14-26) totally outside its immediate context, contemporary students of James in the Global South were quick to see James’s arguments socially and contextually—a *Sitz im Leben* similar to their own experiences.

It is worthwhile to note that Blomberg and Kamell intentionally use gender-inclusive language to the point of adopting the popular oral style of using the third-person plural “they” when its antecedent is a generic singular (14). This might turn off the more “conservative” evangelical, but others in the progressive camp will celebrate it (see 154-155 for an insightful discussion regarding including women in ministry and teaching.)

Finally, the authors have selected their bibliography from primarily evangelical scholars. It might have been helpful to recognize more of the so-called “liberal” commentators in the bibliography, even if the conservative positions remain dominant because of the work’s target audience.

The commentary authors are not only right on target in their exegetical and theological social interpretation, they also show great sensitivity in their application to contemporary American Christianity—especially to the marginal and oppressed in our society. Overall, this commentary provides helpful preaching material: exposition, illustrations, and anecdotes. It is an essential resource for preparing a Jacobean sermon; pastors can enhance sermons having a basis in James by taking serious consideration of the “Theology in Application” section of the passage under consideration.

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Chilton, Bruce. *Abraham’s Curse: Child Sacrifice in the Legacies of the West*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. 259 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95.

The author begins with the day in 1998 when a telephone call took him from home to a crime scene near his church where a young woman had died from a knife-blow to the throat. Later, during the killer’s successful insanity defense, the court learned that an obscure Afro-Caribbean religious rite—involving a god, a knife, and a sacrifice—had provided motivation for the crime.

From here, Bruce Chilton's compelling study goes on to explore how in all three Abrahamic faiths, the *Aqedah*, or "binding" of Isaac, has itself helped foment religious violence. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition found in Gen 22, Abraham hears God commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, as a burnt offering. Abraham obeys, taking his son to the appointed place, "binding him," laying him on top of the wood, and, finally, raising his knife for the slaughter. The fact that God intervenes and a ram dies instead of Isaac has by no means diminished the honor bestowed on both father and son. The two became in all three religious traditions shining examples of faithfulness to God: the one for being ready to kill his own child; the other for being ready to suffer martyrdom.

Examples of the story's impact follow. In their violent resistance to the foreign ruler Antiochus IV, for instance, Jews of the Maccabean movement inspired their fighters with the story. Older Israelites could admire someone willing to sacrifice his child. Young men could look to Isaac for his willingness, out of loyalty to God, to die young.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus called for self-sacrifice and "readiness for martyrdom" (78), finally becoming a martyr himself. His Christian followers compared him with Isaac and came, as Heb 11:1-38 and 12:4 suggest, to see willingness for self-sacrifice as "the very substance of faith" (81, 90, 91). Patristic theology famously continued to venerate martyrdom, making it into a "means of salvation for others" (105, cf. 124). Following the legalization of Christianity under the emperor Constantine, who overlooked Christianity's nonviolence in his pursuit of military conquest, martyrs "became executioners as well as victims" (133). Christianity, now "state-sanctioned," allowed the orthodox to attack their competitors, including the Jews (134).

In Islam, the Qur'anic *Aqedah* names "Ibrahim," but not the son, although eventually the Islamic tradition came to favor the idea that the son was Isma'il. Here the story's context is Ibrahim's conflict with his own people over idolatry. Amid all the difficulty, the Qur'an proposes that Ibrahim had a "vision" of Allah's command that he sacrifice his son. As in Gen 22, father and son submit and again, at the last moment, the slaughter is averted.

Chilton condemns the hostile caricatures of Islam so commonplace in the West, offering instead a forthright rehearsal of the movement's story. In the early seventh century, Muhammad began to receive revelations from Allah. Partly due to pressure from local polytheists, he and his followers left Mecca for Medina in 622 C.E. Eight years later, still solidly monotheistic and now the head of a small army, Muhammad returned to Mecca. By the time of his death ten years later, he had, through "preaching and conquest," established his movement over much of the Arabian Peninsula (154).

The telling is forthright, but with a touch nevertheless of fawning. Chilton assures us, for example, that religious hostility in Muslim territories where Muhammad once ruled had by now made "military acumen" a basic survival strategy: a "pacifist perspective" was simply not an option (160). If later invocations of the Qur'anic *Aqedah* as support for martyrdom are dubious, as Chilton argues, the fact remains that from the beginning the sword was an

important element of Islamic practice. To some degree this is, from Chilton's perspective, justifiable.

Each of the Abrahamic religions, it turns out, has appealed to the story of Abraham and his son in order to galvanize support for war. The "ethic of martyrdom" (196) prompted ferocious violence during the Crusades, the Catholic-Protestant confrontations that followed the Reformation, and the horrific conflicts of the twentieth century. However, Chilton makes a chapter-long argument at the end of the book that neither the biblical story nor the Qur'anic one is really a call to human sacrifice. Both relatings of the story portray a mistaken interpretation of God's will by Abraham/Ibrahim, which is followed by deliverance from the mistake. For the Judeo-Christian heritage, the breakthrough insight is God's "compassionate intervention" (203); for the heritage of Islam, it is God's leading "*against* the impulse" to offer human sacrifice (217).

Muhammad made combat for the cause of Allah into "an article of faith," Chilton concludes, citing as evidence, for example, *Al Tawbah* 9:19, 20 (215); but in contrast with later Muslim interpreters, Muhammad did not use the *Aqedah* to glorify the sacrifice of young people. As for Jesus, the Gospels portray him *doubting* the need for martyrdom. When he finally embraces martyrdom, it is not out of thoughtless "acquiescence" to an ideal. Rather Jesus brings assessment of himself and his circumstances to the situation he is facing, making his own "strategic choice" (209). It is at this point that one of the most striking sentences in the book appears. Chilton claims that "there is no doubt whatever but that the Christian tradition endorses the model of martyrdom that it inherited from Maccabean Judaism, and further develops that model" (209). The further development is that now, at the prospect of martyrdom, "insight into oneself and into the world" must come into play; life's business is "self-giving on behalf of others" and thus it is senseless in light of the Jesus story to "mimic a single, heroic gesture" (210). However, is this proposal by Chilton the entire meaning of Jesus' martyrdom? It seems that the Sermon on the Mount, unmentioned in Chilton's book, suggests another and even more radical difference between the Jesus and Maccabean models.

It is hard to imagine that Chilton is unaware of the Radical Reformation or of interpretive giants such as John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and James William McClendon, Jr., who give new prominence to nonviolent discipleship. Chilton misses Jesus' unmistakable repudiation of the very violence that all three Abrahamic religions tragically came to embrace.

Arguably, Christianity places those who refuse violent conquest on the highest pedestal. Chilton, however, finds in Islam a correlation between military action and religious faith. Both of these topics need further discussion. However, from this generally provocative and valuable book, it is not immediately evident that such conversation opportunities are available.

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